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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on challenges in preparing student teachers for diverse Florida classrooms, noting the current underperformance of many Florida schools, particularly urban schools. These low performing schools tend to serve a disproportionate number of poor and minority students, many in the early stages of learning English as a Second Language. The challenge for general and special educators is to provide an empowering school culture that promotes equity, creates an atmosphere for examining biases and prejudices (and identifies strategies to eliminate them), and promotes self-esteem. Many institutions of higher education are underpreparing teachers at both the preservice and graduate level to work effectively with diverse students. While most preservice educators are white, female, and English speaking, one in six Floridians was born in another country. Suggestions for assisting diverse learners include: begin with the basic premise that all children can learn; create a culture of achievement; foster critical thinking and problem solving skills; use storytelling skills to facilitate communication; understand the importance of culture and language on learning and achievement; model support and respect for diversity; provide culturally relevant literature; teach effective study habits; instill a love of reading; and embrace technology. (Contains 12 references.) (SM)

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ED 476 161

A COAT OF MANY COLORS: PREPARING TEACHERS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF LEARNERS IN INCLUSIVE SETTINGS

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I walked as quickly as I could to my seat. The church service had already begun. The church was indeed *the bright spot* in the community. Its seats were lined with children-5, 6, 7 year olds, and teenagers and young adults. They were part of a liturgical dance ministry, a Drama ministry, an after school tutorial-right in the heart of a community that is considered one of the poorest in the state. The pastor was an ebullient Ph.D. in Theology, with an emphasis in community planning. But there, one Sunday morning, they were hearing their names called, as completing kindergarten in the public school, having perfect attendance, going on to middle school, and getting ready to go to a prestigious university out of state, or getting ready to attend an excellent vocational technical program at the local technical institute-students, families, parents-living and serving in a community vexed by headlines of a local neighborhood *failing school.*

As I took my seat, I sat next to an inquisitive nine- year old male. I later found out that he was a member of one of the liturgical dance groups. He looked at me for a moment and then, "can I hold your menu? (Referring to the church's *order of service* program). "Do you go here? I am in fourth grade, going to fifth." The young student sitting on my left, who overhead the conversation, chimed in, "I don't know what grade I'm going to... It's supposed to be the 5th, but I *failed the test*...

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Page one. Local newspaper. Above the fold. The headlines resonated like a bolt of lightning through the hot and sultry southern summer skies. The summer, 2002 release of scores for the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) revealed that in the state of Florida, thirty percent of the state's fourth graders failed the reading test. In the Central Florida area, 37 percent of the class failed. Eleven schools in the largest county in the university's service area received a grade of "F." One of the eleven schools received an "F", for the second time, therefore having students eligible for the voucher program. Students are eligible for vouchers, which average $3,400 a year, if their school earns F's from

the state twice in four years. The voucher program, as it currently stands, offers parents whose children are enrolled in failing public schools tuition vouchers that they can use at private schools, including religious ones. Additionally, parents may choose to transfer their children to a higher performing public school. In the school in the Central Florida area that received a second "F," 103 students applied for the voucher. *Opportunity Scholarships,* which is the proper name for the state's accountability vouchers, give state money to students to go to private schools or another public institution when their school has failed twice in four years. On August 5, 2002, a Leon County, Florida Circuit Judge ruled that the voucher program violates the state constitution because it allows public dollars to be spent on religious and private institutions. Further, the judge wrote in his ruling that the court "recognized and empathized" with the purpose of the voucher legislation - to give options to students attending low-performing schools but could not abandon the explicit language of the constitution. That language says state revenue cannot be used "directly or indirectly in aid of any church, sect, or religious denomination or in aid of any sectarian institution. Approximately ten schools in the state of Florida and approximately 650 children may be affected by this ruling. The outcome is still pending.

Vignettes like the ones described are being played out throughout the state of Florida, as school districts prepare for the onslaught of parental and public reactions to the release of the latest results of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Newspapers and other media throughout the state led with headlines sharing school districts grades. The 5-year-old Florida Comprehensive Test (FCAT) -- measuring reading, writing and math skills – is part of a sweeping reform passed in 1997; an effort intended to improve the state of Florida's public schools. In 1999, Florida's Governor Jeb Bush's A-Plus Plan for Education tied schools' FCAT scores to funding. Many of the under performing schools are located in the urban area of our counties

This paper seeks to explore and to further examine some challenges that all students face in these changing demographics. Issues related to changing demographics, language and culture;

underpreparation of preservice teachers in schools/colleges of education; strategies to address the needs of students in our classes will be highlighted.

Lower performing schools. In lower performing schools often bear similar characteristics: these schools generally serve a disproportionately number of poor and minority students; at least seventy-five percent or more of the students may be on free or reduced priced lunch (see Appendix 1).

Challenges. In the school that received a second "F," many of the students are from Haiti and are in the stages of learning English as a second language. It is not uncommon to having an eleven- year old student from Haiti coming to school with little or no formal education. All of the elementary schools that achieved a grade of "F" had at least a 75% student population. One high school had a near 50% Black student population; a second one, 78%, and a third one, 97%.

Perspectives on diversity. Diversity, to some, refers to issues of color-usually black, white, or brown. But that is such a narrow perspective. Individuals with disabilities, individuals who are culturally and linguistically diverse, all are diverse. Further, all students bring their own special *gifts* and challenges "to the table." An environment that is diverse, relevant, accepting, and supportive. Students in our classrooms come from a variety of racial, cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds.

A different world. : It is generally agreed that in years to come, general and special educators will be teaching groups of learners who are quite different from any others that they have taught in the past. Moreover, many of these youngsters will come from more diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds[1] In addition; they will exhibit a wide range of language, learning, and behavioral characteristics that may present challenges to educators. Some may be at risk of academic failure and placed in special education settings because of their limited English proficiency, their behavioral characteristics, and their socioeconomic status. The challenge for general and special educators is to

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[1] American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, (2001, August), *Communicating In a Diverse Society* (Retrieved February 24, 2002, from asha.org/press/Diverse_society.cfm)

provide an empowering school culture. Vaughn, Bos, and Schumm [2]described such a culture as one that promotes gender, racial, and social-class equity; it creates an atmosphere for looking at biases and prejudices, identifying strategies to eliminate them, and substituting opportunities to enhance the positive self-esteem of students. Students of color are among those who deserve an empowering school environment that provides opportunities for understanding their traditional cultural and linguistic characteristics and deals with frequent biases and prejudices that they face. The challenge is further exacerbated by the fact that institutions of higher education may be underpreparing teacher education students-both at the preservice and graduate level- to work effectively with these children. As further indicated by Nieto[3], most preservice educators are female, White, and English speaking. Often they are products of predominantly White colleges of teacher education.

What we know

Census figures. According to the 2000 United States census, one in six Floridians was born in another country, far more than the national average of one in ten. Nearly 2.5 million Floridians speak Spanish at home. Nearly 2 million people in the state live in poverty.

Language and culture. A child's communicative patterns are shaped through multiple sources of language input and various sociocultural factors, including: (a) the community in which the family lives and the family's dialect, education, socioeconomic status and social background; (b) the child's community network; and (c) attitudes in the child's community about standard dialects (e.g. among teachers and the general society).

Language affects families, communities, and schools. This is especially true when individuals attempt to forge relationships with each other and collaborate, but do not communicate in the same languages;

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[2] S Vaughn, C. Bos, & J. Schumm, J., *Teaching Exceptional, Diverse, and At Risk Students in the General Education Classroom. (2nd. ed.).* Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2000

[3] S Nieto, *Affirming Diversity: The Socio-Political Content of Multicultural Teacher Education.* (3rd ed.), New York: Longman, 2000.

In the largest central Florida county, there are at least 147 languages spoken, from Spanish and German to Urdu and Serbo-Croatian. Many classroom teachers face the ever-increasing challenge of teaching students to read English even before they can read in their own language. The challenge of learning a new language is significant. Basic language proficiency often takes years to achieve. There are typically never enough English-as-a-Second-Language classes to meet demands, and aspiring candidates often wait months or years to move up on waiting lists. While serving as a volunteer to encourage individuals to register to vote in a recent county, volunteers were met constantly with the reply, "I have no vote/I no citizen." When asked how long they'd been in the country, they stated "ten years,' "12 years", 'I no speak English good. I wait for classes''. Lack of basic reading and writing skills in a person's native language (or speaking a language with no written form) hinders the ability to learn a new language.

Strategies that work. Any of the situations that have been presented, in and of themselves, are challenging. The question, therefore remains, what can we do to assist learners in our care to realize their maximum potential?

- Begin with the basic premise that all children can learn, and for the most part, enter into the school doors with a willingness to learn. What happens then, between the hours that the student is in your care-is largely dependent upon you, the teacher;
    - Create a "culture of achievement"[4]. Dorothy Height, President Emeriti, National Council of Negro Women, puts it this way, "while it is true that you may lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink; one, however, can create a thirst[5]
    - Educators must create a learning environment that fosters the use of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Teachers should display their excitement for teaching communication

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[4]S. Beale, A tale of two inner cities: Garfield High School, East L.A. *Heraldsphereopinions.browndaily.com.* (Retrieved on July 8, 2002, at http://www.browndailyherald.com/stories.)

[5] Dorothy Height, Public Meeting. Alpha Kappa Alpha National Convention, July 7, 2002

skills to promote students' growth of positive attitudes toward learning. Modeling the communication behavior they expect of their students is essential;

- The classroom environment should be structured in such a way that students feel at ease in participating in various instructional arrangements (e.g., large and small groups);
- Identifying current issues and concerns of students and their families is essential in the teaching-learning process. Effective and proactive teachers become familiar with what is meaningful in the lives of their students and the lives of their students' families. Information of this type will assist teachers in identifying and developing suitable, practical examples for use in the classroom.
- Educators should use storytelling skills to facilitate communication skills. For example, in some cultures, the passing down of family traditions, values, and beliefs through storytelling is a very rich tradition. Accordingly, these students are inclined to remember a concept or a construct when given a story to make the connection. Details including who, what, when, where, how, and why should be given. After the story, teachers should check the students' comprehension by having them suggest alternative options to produce the same results;
- Understand the influence of culture and language on learning and academic achievement. It is important for us to understand the family's cultural belief system[6], and how one's belief system affects how we as educators provide services for the student. We can certainly build upon those beliefs by involving families throughout the educational process;
- You, the teacher, must model your support and respect of individual differences. Be willing to reflect upon your own biases. We all have them. In one of my graduate classes at the university, students are required to complete a series of *personal awareness reflections.* This activity was shared with me by another colleague and is one of the most important assignments that I've ever

required students to do. They (the students) often share in confidence that they had written things on paper that was not shared with anyone else outside of their peer or family circle. It afforded them an opportunity to face some issues head on. *The assignment is as follows:*

- Write your own thoughts regarding the following. You are simply going to be "thinking" on paper. Try to be as reflective as possible. Also, I suggest that you read what you have written before you submit it and include additional thoughts as they occur to you. Some of these may be shared anonymously, but you will be advised when this is going to occur.

  - ✓ Ref. #1 Ways in which my culture has shaped me are . . . (include behaviors, attitudes, habits, values, routines, etc.

  - ✓ Ref. #2 Reflect on your own biases and prejudices and ways in which you have acted or refrained from acting on them.

  - ✓ Ref. #3 Reflect on your vision of how diversity issues should be handled by society, especially educational institutions.

  - ✓ Ref. # 4 Open Forum - you choose or

  - ✓ Ref. #5 Ways in which I have changed as a result of my experiences associated with this class. (Be specific and incorporate your experiences associated with the various activities.)

- "He who tells the story creates the culture" Children need to see themselves in books. They need to know that the people who write them understand who they are and their needs. It is important that students be authors who share their common heritage and their common experiences;

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[6]S. Lamorey, The effects of culture on special education services. Evil eyes, prayer meetings, and IEPs, (TEACHING *Exceptional Children*, May/June, 2002). 34(5), 67-71.

- Let's look at how children learn, examine the student's learning style(s). As a teacher, become proficient in identifying different learning styles. When preparing lesson plans, include activities that using multiple intelligences;[7]

- Effective study skill habits must be taught. Some children are not effective learners because they don't know how to study and prepare for studying. We can borrow from the special education literature, where clearly defined strategies have been developed for assisting students in a variety of learning tasks;[8]

- Become interested in the student. Who have been some of his/her favorite teachers?
  Just as some of the current models for multicultural education implemented in the schools do not necessarily support the history, identity, and development of some students, strategies must include those address issues other than racial and ethnic issues;

- All students, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, have diverse learning needs;

- Instill the love of reading in the hearts and minds of young leaders by modeling it. Encourage parents to set aside a time at home where the whole family just reads. Be realistic in your expectations-start small, and then expand;

- We must all become observers of language, and work to suspend negative attitudes about nonstandard dialects, foreign accents, non-native speakers in general;

- In schools, it begins with when someone steps in the door or on school property. Look at the appearance of the school. How *user friendly* are staff? From those who are primarily responsible for the cleanliness of the school all the way to the instructional leader(s). Do your part in fostering environments that are supportive and nurturing of all-students, staff, and parents;

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[7] H. Gardner, *Frames of Mind. The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, New York: Basic Books, 1983
[8] D Scanlon, PROVE-ing What You Know, (*TEACHING Exceptional Children, March* /April, 2002), 34(4), 48-54.

- Tap the existing positive community role models. There are exemplary models all around-you must simply find them. Each of the different sectors within communities has the potential to promote positive development among adolescents. This potential is maximized when all the parts work together toward this goal, using a community-wide approach. This also increases communication and agreement[9]
- Don't be afraid of technology! Embrace it. Don't fear it.

  Many libraries provide free basic Internet services. Get to know the local library in your area. Use it as a field trip experience for your family or for your students. It will be up to you, the teacher to bridge the Digital Divide;
- "Bloom where you're planted!" So the school that you are currently working is not your first choice? Do the very best that you can there! Students deserve that, and so do their families, and you!
- Finally, ask yourself, "What difference does the difference make?" Each of us can bring something different *to the table,* an opportunity to provide multiple perspectives to the same event[10]

Discussion

As one student in my graduate level class writes," our histories give us a foundation. The roads that lead us all to a common place are unique to us all as every color is in a box of 100 crayons. Our skin color, our features, hair texture and eyes tell very little of the people that we are." The issues that we face today in our classrooms transcend racial and ethnic boundaries; they are far more complex. Children must be taught to be resilient. Empower them to believe that they can be successful-and no matter the challenges

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[9] J Dryfoos, *Adolescents at Risk: Prevalence and Prevention.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1990

[10] J. Green & M. McClelland, What difference does the difference make? Understanding difference across perspectives. *Discourse Processes, 27,* 219-230, 1999.

that they may face; they must possess an "insistent passion for excellence"[11]. The challenge, reports Hernandez [12] is for "teachers to take what they know and use it to create learning environments in which **all** students can succeed. Teachers need to determine what they are already doing well, identify what they can do better, and chart an effective course for improving instruction (p.297).

[11] E Graves, Phenomenal women, *Black Enterprise,* 12, August, 2002

[12] H Hernandez, *Multicultural education. A Teacher's Guide to Linking Context, Process, and Content* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, N J: Prentice-Hall, 2001

Appendix 1

Portrait of a school

Students at this school are mostly poor and black; 91 percent of them qualify for free or discount school lunches;

It is projected that for the 2002-2003 school term, 94 percent of students will be on the lunch program;

The school's population is changing, too. In the past two years, the number of Haitian students has doubled to 180;

One of every five children comes from a home where family members speak little or no English;

For every 10 children who start the school year, more than four will move by the end.

These challenges aren't a problem in terms of discipline or lack of parental support, the principal reports. The school has the lowest absenteeism rate of any elementary school within four miles, with only 4 percent of students out on any given day. The state average is 6 percent;

With an average class size of 18 students, compared with 22 statewide, the school gives children more teacher attention than is typical across Florida; But many of the school's children bring problems, such as custody fights and abuse that can turn a principal into a social worker, one district school official reports;

A third of the school's teachers leave each year, and 45 percent of the faculty members have fewer than four years' experience; The school's teachers also have fewer advanced degrees than the average district school teacher does.

Horvitz, L. (2002, June 13). Among Florida's worst. *Orlando Sentinel*, A-1

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